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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000254

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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: POLITICAL SUSPICIONS FESTER WHILE
SOCIAL PRESSURES INCREASE

Classified By: Charge' James F. Entwistle for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary and Introduction

11. (C) During a February 10-13 DCM visit to Maldives (in conjunction with a port call by the missile destroyer USS McCampbell from the USS Ronald Reagan strike group), conversations with government officials and the opposition conveyed a sense of logjam in the political reform process as social pressures grow on the capital island of Male' amid concerns about Maldives' dependence on foreign labor. The DCM's visit took place against the background of a facilitation effort by Commonwealth special envoy (and former Malaysian deputy prime minister) Musa Hitam the previous week which had garnered mixed results. Musa and his team had held "one-on-one" meetings with each political party to discuss a new constitution and hear their views on the political reform process but a proposed "all-party" roundtable fell through when the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) refused to attend since the government had rebuffed their pre-condition that four detainees be released before the roundtable. End Summary and Introduction

Government Tries to Build Confidence

12. (C) Not surprisingly, government officials were quite frustrated by the collapse of the multi-party talks especially since they had agreed that MDP chairman Mohamed Nasheed would be transported from house arrest to participate (and also offered to produce him for the MDP "one-on-one" with the Commonwealth team). Nonetheless, both Foreign Minister Ahmed Shaheed and Attorney General Hassan Saeed told the DCM that, in their view, the "one-on-one" meetings between the parties and the Commonwealth team had been very useful and expressed hope that the Commonwealth would have a proposed working text of a constitution soon.

13. (C) Clearly, however, the government will not wait for the MDP forever. The FM and AG told the DCM that the government has had a draft constitution "in our back pocket" for some months

and reserved the option of, if the MDP prevented the Commonwealth-facilitated process from going forward, introducing their draft as the basis for further discussion and eventual adoption. In the same vein, the government has finished a "roadmap" document that spells out a timeline of political events that would culminate in a Presidential election in late 2007 or early 2008. The FM and AG confided that the government, as a way of breaking the current logjam, might release the roadmap soon. They readily acknowledged, however, that the MDP and other opposition parties almost certainly would immediately criticize the proposed election date as being too far off. Saeed told the DCM he understood that concern but did not see how the election could be earlier since "building democracy is more than just having an election." In particular, Saeed posited, it is essential that a "raft" of legislation his office will shortly move forward be in place before a meaningful presidential election could be held. This list would include a new police act, a civil service reform bill, an "armed forces" bill and a media bill which would spell out press freedoms and responsibilities. Absent these, the AG averred, a presidential election would mean "a new face but the same old system."

Holding Off Hardliners Not Easy

¶4. (C) Shaheed and Saeed also contended that these bills and the roadmap, once made public, would

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help them in their ongoing struggle to keep President Gayoom on the path towards reform. They characterized the President as committed to the process but under constant pressure to backslide by "hardliners" such as his brother Abdulla Yameen and Health Minister Ibrahim Ilyas who realize they would "lose everything" if Gayoom lost power and thus were fighting the reform process tooth and nail. The FM and AG somewhat wearily told DCM that keeping the reform process alive was a constant struggle. Two examples: first, they had "for a long time" tried in vain to get Gayoom to show more flexibility on the prisoner release issue, in particular by releasing a few of the four "MDP cases" before the Commonwealth team arrived. Second, they described a hastily-convened cabinet meeting with Gayoom earlier the same day to discuss MDP plans to hold a demonstration later in February to draw attention to their demand that all appointed members of the Special Majlis (parliament) be removed. Shaheed and Saeed had managed to convince the "old guard" not to suppress the demonstration but rather let it happen with the police kept at a distance. "Preventing it or breaking it up is exactly what the MDP wants us to do," Saeed commented.

MDP Seems Focused Only on Gayoom Departure

¶5. (C) Shaheed and Saeed were correct in their prediction of MDP reaction. In a meeting with DCM, MDP heavyweight (and former Foreign Secretary and SAARC Secretary General) Ibrahim Zaki was scathing in his assessment of the government's reform program and the Commonwealth facilitation process (a concept that the MDP had earlier trumpeted). Zaki's view is that no further preparations are necessary and that a Presidential election should be held as soon as possible. He labeled the Commonwealth process a "farce" and

claimed the outside involvement was unnecessary since it duplicated an indigenous process of consultation already under way. Zaki said the immediate release of Jennifer Latheef, Mohamed Nasheed, Ahmed Didi and Naushed Waheed was a non-negotiable precondition to MDP participation in any multi-party consultation, with or without the Commonwealth. Zaki was dismissive of DCM's observation that while the detainee issue was hugely important to the MDP (indeed, they had first met when the DCM visited Zaki and others in detention on Dhoonidhoo island in 2004), the MDP has made a fundamental miscalculation in opting out of the Commonwealth-led all-party exercise. DCM's observation that participation would have demonstrated that the MDP was seriously thinking about the longterm development of a more open, democratic Maldives found equally barren ground with Zaki: "All that matters is getting Gayoom out of office and our people out of jail."

Many Young Maldivians Idle

16. (C) The ongoing political tensions are set against a backdrop of growing social pressures, especially on the capital island of Male' where a burgeoning population of over 80,000 strains infrastructure and public services. Indeed, National Security Service Chief of Staff MG Mohamed Zahir told DCM he estimates the "floating population" of Male' on any given day approaches 100,000 (with nationwide population around 300,000). An impressive government effort continues to expand the manmade island of Hulhumale near Male' to ease crowding on the capital island. Several thousand residents are now in place and the government has put together an incentive package to get more to move there from Male' (and boat shuttles now operate every fifteen minutes between Hulhumale and a new

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terminal on the Male' waterfront). But, several government officials predicted to DCM that crowding on Male' will only lessen gradually as smaller family sizes become the norm in the years ahead. Moreover, Ministry of Planning officials recently told Econchief that tsunami reconstruction efforts have pulled resources away from Hulhumale development and slowed progress.

17. (C) In the meantime, underemployment is a significant issue on Male', illustrated, especially in the evening, by large numbers of youths on the streets with seemingly little to do. Defense Minister Ismail Shafeeu described the situation in his Male' neighborhood to DCM: "These kids have nothing to get up for in the morning so they race around on their motorcycles all night and get in fights. The police don't know how to respond." Not surprisingly, drug use is on the rise. A UNICEF official in Male' recently told poloff that the average age of first drug use is eleven (in a country where half the population is under 25). Smoking heroin is the main method but, according to UNICEF, intravenous drug use is growing.

While Dependence on Foreign Labor Grows

18. (C) Ironically, Maldives is also grappling with a growing foreign worker population. MG Zahir told DCM there are 40,000 foreign workers in Maldives (of whom 10,000 are from Bangladesh).

Defense Minister Shafeeu said the Bangladeshis, who work in the construction industry on Male' as well as staffing many resorts, are a cause of particular concern to him, especially as Bangladesh "gets more radical." Moreover, Shafeeu continued, many Bangladeshi workers are "straight from the farm" and are victimized by labor brokers who take most of their first year's salary to cover airfare and other costs. "These guys can't get off the island and are ripe for exploitation in the mosques," Shafeeu concluded. MG Zahir offered similar views but noted that the foreign labor force will only continue to grow: "They'll do work that Maldivians won't touch while Maldivians who can afford it try to get established in Colombo or Trivandrum."

Comment

19. (C) At first glance, the political situation in Maldives seems close to an impasse with the Government believing it has put in motion a genuine timetable for political reform and free and fair presidential elections while the opposition, obsessed with ousting President Gayoom, jaundicedly views the government effort as a Trojan horse designed to keep Gayoom in power. The irony is that, in our experience, there is probably much commonality of interest between many in the two camps. While we are optimistic that the process will continue forward, with the next tangible step likely to be a Commonwealth draft of a new constitution, the international community will need to continue to urge both sides to think longterm and keep their eyes on the prize - a more democratic, just society. During this trip our nudging consisted of urging government flexibility on prisoner releases while suggesting (again) to the MDP that it needed to move beyond its Gayoom obsession and think about broader democracy and human rights themes.

110. (C) We can continue this "both sides of the aisle" effort when two Colombo-based MDP members visit Washington for a conference this month and if the Foreign Minister and Attorney General go ahead with a proposed visit to Washington "after Easter." Indeed, all parties in the Maldives

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political process have no choice but to pay close attention to views in key capitals given the country's dependence on foreign tourism. FM Shaheed told DCM that his priority since taking office has been to improve "our two most important relationships - the U.S. and India." Evidence of both was on display, with the USS McCampbell anchored off the Male' waterfront at the same time Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran was visiting Maldives at Shaheed's invitation. The coincidental symbolism was undoubtedly hard to miss for many Maldivians. End Comment
ENTWISTLE